

OUT OF THE ASHES



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This is a three-chapter teaser.

Note: This novel is written in NZ English, which differs slightly from UK and US English.

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Chapter One

Grace's scream pierced the silence, a deep guttural roar from somewhere beyond herself. It raged from the only place dark enough to contain it, the depths of hell. Like a war cry going forth, it pushed back against the walls closing in on her, inch by inch.

She stood, battling to regain some semblance of control, but the darkness was rolling in, claiming her, pulling her into its clutches. She squeezed her eyes closed and fought against the waves of nausea rolling through her. A tsunami in the distance, one she knew would only grow in strength and drown her.

Be still.

The quiet whisper commanded the raging ocean of her grief. She exhaled through pursed lips and pressed the balls of her feet against the solid ground, an attempt to maintain her balance. Opening her eyes, she scanned the room. Every eye was on her, blazing with expectation. While she could still hear the scream echoing in her ears, their blank faces showed they hadn't heard her silent torment, didn't recognize the horror plastered underneath her mask of composure.

The internal scream intensified as she dropped her eyes to the three coffins laid out in front of her, closed to hide the damage to their beautiful faces.

I can't do this.

She tried to block the scream, knowing her mask was crumbling before their eyes, exposing her anguish. She

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needed to be strong. She had to be. There was nothing else. She must focus. *Focus on the words.*

Grace lowered her eyes to the paper crumpled under her stiff white fingers, but as she tried to wrap her mouth around the words, her jaw clenched and the remaining sliver of courage fled. She glanced towards the exit, to the left of the platform and then back at the page, at the words blurring before her eyes. She wanted to run away. To be somewhere her husband and children weren't lying cold and lifeless in three wooden boxes.

"Oh, God." Her gasp echoed through the shrinking room. *Help me.* She raised her eyes to the heavens, tears streaming down her face. She couldn't stop them.

Be strong and courageous.

Unclenching her teeth, she took one last look at the photographs. *It has to be you, Grace.* She tried to gain her composure, tried to remember why she was here, tried to remember why it was so important that she speak.

"David was..." Pressing her eyes closed, she tried to keep the scream from filling the room. *Oh, God.* Her short gasps for air gave no relief. She needed to get out of here, away from all the eyes, but her legs wouldn't move. The weight of grief set like concrete around her feet. She was trapped, and the scream was rising.

"I can't."

A chorused gasp echoed through the church as her legs faltered, and she disappeared behind the pulpit. When strong arms enveloped her, she opened her eyes and looked into the face of her closest friend, the man who'd been her safe haven since she was fourteen years old. His calming presence gave her strength.

"Just breathe, Grace," Simon whispered as he held her close.

Her racing heart slowed as her airways opened, allowing the oxygen free passage. "I can't do this, Simon. I need to leave."

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“I’m not letting you do that. You’d never forgive yourself.”

“But I...” The words failed her. He was right.

“You can do this. You are the strongest woman I know. Just take your time. They can wait.”

Grace felt anything but strong, but the faith his words carried lent her courage. She allowed the calm timbre of his voice to infiltrate the void, to calm the scream, to soothe the panicked tension. This was Simon, who saw through her defences. His own grief for the family they loved was woven into every word.

“Focus on your memories, Grace. Remember what was beautiful.”

In out, in out, in out. Grace didn’t know how much time had passed before she recovered. She filled her lungs, motioned she was ready with a movement only Simon could have noticed, took hold of his outstretched hands, stepped forward, and grasped the sides of the pulpit.

She could do this.

Grace smoothed out her crumpled notes, lifted her face to the crowd, and spoke. She shared how she’d painstakingly brushed Allie’s long silky hair night after night. She spoke about Patrick’s elegant eyelashes, which were too long to be wasted on a boy, about the gaps in his cheeky smile that looked ridiculous but adorable at the same time.

A lump rose in her throat as she remembered the sound of their laughter when they had tickle-fests or told stupid jokes. Her chest heaved as the wave rolled into its peak, stripping her of control. She pleaded with God to hold it off, just until she’d finished, and glanced down at Simon, who’d made his way back to his seat.

“Breathe,” he mouthed.

She paused for a moment. *Focus.* Despite the storm raging inside, it felt good to speak about David and Allie and Patrick. Good to reflect on their lives. Good to talk about how Allie would beg her to stay up late so they could cuddle on the

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couch and read her favourite books, or whisper secrets to each other while David worked in the other room. Good to talk about how Patrick tried hard to be a tough guy but was so scared of the dark he would hug the wall all the way to the toilet at night, turning on every light in the house and then leap onto his bed from a metre away so the monsters couldn't grab his legs.

She told them about her honeymoon with David. About their dreams and the little things he did which made her crazy, like his ability to fill every day with tasks. As a defence lawyer, he'd had ample opportunity to display his workaholic tendencies, and he did. But he always made time for his family. Always. David had given her everything she'd ever wanted. Most of all, he'd given her the loving family she'd fantasised about during her lonely childhood.

People laughed, cried, smiled. Some stared at the coffins, expressions blank. Those were the faces she avoided. She glanced down at the last photo, her favourite picture of David, and her composure vanished. She'd been brave. She'd honoured their memory. Now her face ached from the constant battle against her emotional collapse.

David took her breath away, his eyes beckoning her still. She'd snapped this photo while they were holidaying on the Spanish island of Palma de Mallorca, a world away from their home in Wellington, New Zealand. David had been trying to convince her to go topless on one of the many local beaches where bare breasts were more common than bikinis. He'd been on a mission to encourage her to face her fear and live on the wild side. With him, life was one big adventure.

Grace held her tissue-filled hand to her mouth, inhaling short, shaky breaths, trying to calm the gasping wail threatening to escape her lips. She was done. It was over. Simon returned to her side and walked her to her seat, where she collapsed into his embrace. She'd done it. The screaming had stopped ringing in her ears. There was nothing left. It was taking every ounce of her will to stay upright in her chair, her

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physical and emotional strength pooling on the floor.

The sound of angelic voices filled the room. She opened her eyes to see Allie and Patrick's classmates standing tall and proud. Their tear-stained baby faces spoke a thousand words, and it warmed her heart to see how much her children were loved. Sarah, who Grace had claimed as a long-lost sister the first time they'd met at university, reached over and pressed a wad of fresh tissues into her hand, then held her arm as if to say... *We've got you.* And they did. In a room full of people, Sarah and Simon were the only two Grace could imagine with her on this tightrope.

When the song ended, the children filed down the aisle, depositing letters, pictures and flowers on the caskets containing her babies. When Allie's best friend Abby started speaking, Grace's heart broke for the precious girl who was forced to feel such devastating loss at such a young age. Allie and Abby had been inseparable since their first day of school.

Abby's little mouth quivered as the tears streamed down her face. "Goodbye, Allie. I love you."

Grace gasped and raised her hand to her mouth, trying to stifle her own emotion as Abby continued. "I'll miss you. I'll never forget you." Even though she spoke in a whisper, her voice carried as did the collective sound of mourning.

Grace lost herself in her memories as the minister shared his message and others moved on and off the stage to share their eulogies. Then the service ended, and people filed by, offering their condolences. Forced smiles of thanks and brief embraces were all she could muster. She nodded as they told her how sorry they were, or shared memories with her. She watched as their lips moved and her mind acknowledged the presence of sound, but she couldn't hear it. The dark shadow of grief had claimed her. She was bound by it, every limb, every word, every thought.

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Grace leaned into the doorframe and inhaled the glorious vibrancy bounding around her. She wrapped herself around the image, memorising every detail, desperate for this to be her reality and not just a memory she searched for whenever she closed her eyes.

The post-soccer barbecue had been a raging success. Families had turned up armed with baskets of food, drinks and a variety of outdoor games to celebrate their end of season win. Patrick was hailed the hero, scoring five of their six goals and his face revealed pure delight at having led his team to victory. Grace breathed in the sight, as she admired the scene from afar with the devastating knowledge of how quickly this life, noise and colour would drain from her world.

The Kingston's barbecue lunches always rolled over into dinner, especially on beautiful summer nights. David had arrived home just in time to farewell their guests and scavenge some of the leftover food. He'd been called in early that morning to fight fires in a big case and had missed the big game. After Patrick's enthusiastic download and curling up with Allie on the couch for a compulsory end-of-day cuddle, David left them watching television and found Grace storing the rest of the leftovers into the fridge.

Grace drew every detail from her memory and filled the familiar scene with it. The pad and paper on the table, with a

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scribbled list. David's tie loosened around his neck, his top two buttons undone, the dirty dishes spread all over the bench.

If one thing had changed that day. If one thing had been done differently, she wouldn't be here, surviving on mere crumbs of her family's existence. She'd be there, with her husband sharing their dreams around the table, and cuddled up with her kids on the couch.

"I forgot about the newcomer's lunch tomorrow. We've used everything I'd set aside," she heard herself say and cursed her very words.

"That's fine. We'll shoot into the supermarket on the way home from church."

"There won't be enough time. People will start arriving at twelve."

"Really Grace? You want me to go now, don't you?" David's face scrunched up in protest.

Her heart clenched. *No. Tell him no.*

"Would you?"

"I've had a massive week, babe. I'm shattered and the last thing I want to do is get back in the car."

"I know, and I'm sorry. But, we won't have time tomorrow and I've got a huge clean-up to do here. Unless you want to do the clean-up instead?"

Grace watched David lower his head to his hands and growl. If only she'd listened. If only she'd put her husband's needs ahead of her need to be the perfect host. If only he hadn't acquiesced to her wishes.

"I'll go," he said. "Write me a list."

No, baby. Fight me on it. Please.

Grace slid the list towards him, slipped onto his lap and whispered a promise she'd known he wouldn't be able to resist. "I'll make it worth your while."

David teased his hands under the rim of her shirt, sending her body into overdrive. After eighteen years of marriage, the thought of making love to him still made her skin buzz.

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“I’ll hold you to that.” He stole a kiss, lingering, driving her crazy. David was a master at his craft and he knew it. Lifting her off his lap, he slapped her playfully on the behind. “Now get cleaning woman, ’cause I’m taking you to bed when I get home.”

“Yes, sir!” Grace stood at attention and called out to the kids.

When David grimaced, she leaned down to press her lips to his cheek. “I’ll work faster if you take them. Then we can, you know... finish.” Her hand moving up and down his torso was interrupted by Patrick and Allie’s reluctant arrival in the kitchen.

“I don’t want to go,” Patrick moaned.

“Me neither,” Allie said. “Can’t we just watch telly? We won’t get in your way.”

Let them stay. Grace begged from the sidelines, but the players continued, oblivious to her presence and desperate pleas.

“No, you’ve hardly seen your Dad this week. Count this as quality time.”

“A car trip to the supermarket is hardly quality time, Mum,” Allie argued. Grace caught David nodding.

“It’s what you make it. Now, off you all go. I’ve got cleaning to do.”

I’ve got cleaning to do.

“But Mum...”

I’ve got cleaning to do. The words were like daggers to her heart as she watched the scene unfold.

“Come on kids,” David said. “You know what Mum’s like when she has an idea in her head. We’ll get an ice cream while we’re out. Deal?” He ushered them out the door, winking over the top of their heads.

Grace turned on her favourite tunes and started filling the sink with steaming hot sudsy water. She raised her hand to wave goodbye to her children as the car backed out of the driveway, oblivious to the fact it would be the last time.

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Looking on, remembering that as she blitzed the house she was fantasising about the sexy time David had promised her, Grace's heart tore open. The darkness reaching into the safe places in her memory and taking hold. Something which had once had her dancing around the kitchen in anticipation, now only offered immeasurable pain and regret.

Unlike most mornings, Grace didn't startle awake. Instead, she replayed the memory over and over again, trying to force a change in the script. She even succeeded once, and dove heart first into the scene, refusing to leave the safety of her husband's loving embrace.

When the light of day touched her, she protested its unwanted invasion of the fantasy she'd created in the night. When she opened her eyes to find David's side of the bed vacant, her whole body ached with a desperation that could never be satisfied. Not now, not ever. Grace curled herself up into a ball on the bed and wept.

How could she live one more moment without feeling David's touch on her skin? How would she survive one more day without the family she planned her whole world around? How could she endure a lifetime without him?

"Where were you?" she cried out to God. "Where were you when they were dying?"

I never left them.

Screams pierced her memory, images that still plagued her. She knew His words could not be true.

"You left them when you let them die."

I never left them. I have not left you.

A deep frustration rumbled through her. Grace twisted herself around and let it roar into her pillow. Her thoughts on rapid fire.

Good, good father... A loving God, who will only give you as much as you can handle.

Never had the truth felt so false.

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FIVE WEEKS AD

“I don’t need a stranger in my house right now,” Grace said. Why hadn’t Simon discussed this with her first?

“I get it, Grace, but nothing we do is helping. Sarah and I are struggling. We need help... to help you.”

“Nothing you do is helping, because nothing will make this better. Talking isn’t going to bring them back.” Grace both loved and hated that Sarah and Simon had all but moved in. As much as she despised their interference some days, it did bring her comfort to know the house wasn’t as empty as it felt, but this was a step too far.

“Damn it. Why won’t everybody just leave me alone?”

“Because we love you. It’s been five weeks, and you’re still having nightmares that keep you up half the night. We’re worried about you. You’ve barely spoken in weeks.”

If Grace hadn’t seen the look of desperation on Simon’s face, she’d have told the woman to get lost, and told both Simon and Sarah she needed some space. Time to herself, where her every move wasn’t being judged by people who had no bloody idea what she was going through. She leaned down, gripped the edge of the bench with both hands and breathed out an exhausted sigh.

“Please, Grace, can we try?” Simon asked.

Despite the pain and anger she clung to like a favourite purse, the desperation in his eyes picked at the edges of her conscience. She reached out and took his hand in hers.

“Are you okay?” she asked for the first time.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.” The black circles on his paled face contradicted his words.

“You need to get some sleep,” she said as if his sleep deprivation was a choice. “I think you should go home, back to your life.”

“You are my life.”

Grace clenched her teeth. She hated that she was taking him down with her, but they were family. If the roles were reversed, she wouldn’t leave his side either. Biting her tongue, knowing it would do no good, she turned and walked back into the lounge, taking a seat opposite the unwanted visitor. Simon joined her on the couch and placed large glasses of water in front of each of them.

“This is Eliza,” Simon said.

“I’m a grief counsellor,” Eliza added.

“I know.”

Grace’s eyes were drawn to the glass on the table as if attached to an invisible thread. She was mesmerised by the drips forming on the outside of the glass and sliding down into a wet ring on her wooden table.

“Grace?”

She looked up to see Eliza looking at her, a question in her eyes. “Sorry. Did you ask me something?”

“Simon mentioned you’d had some episodes.”

Grace threw a disapproving look at Simon. What the heck was he thinking? This is the last thing she needed. “I have nightmares, which is perfectly understandable under the circumstances.”

“It is,” the counsellor said. “Although from what Simon told me, it sounds as though you’re experiencing more than nightmares.”

“I’ve had a couple of ‘episodes’ if that’s what you want to call them. But when somebody’s whole family dies, you don’t expect them to be okay after only five weeks, do you?” Grace tried to bite down on her anger as Simon stiffened beside her.

“Can you describe them for me? Simon said there was one at the police station.”

“Seriously?” Grace asked.

“If you can, I think it could be helpful.”

If I answer her questions, maybe she’ll leave me the hell alone. Grace tucked her legs onto the couch and leaned back into its cushiony folds. Closing her eyes, she exhaled the words. “I’d been asking for details about the accident. I needed to know what happened, to make sense of it all.”

Simon reached over and laced his fingers in hers, offering her his strength. She sucked in a breath and allowed the painful memory to resurface.

“I could see it all, as Detective Fraser was describing it. It was as though I was there. I could feel the water grabbing at me, pulling me down deeper and deeper. They were screaming for me,” Grace said as the first wave of tears touched her cheeks.

“He told me they were alive, when they hit the water. That they didn’t die from the impact. I know I’d begged him for information, but I didn’t want to hear that they’d suffered, that they knew.” Grace clenched her jaw in an attempt to slow the onslaught, willing herself to get through it, hoping that somehow speaking about it might take its power away.

“I could see them in the car, banging on the windows, yelling for me to help them. I was in there. In the water swimming, trying to get to them, trying to save my babies.” The words came faster and faster, pouring out of her like a dam bursting its banks, she was powerless to stop them. “I was shaking from the cold. I kept swimming, trying to fight the current. They needed me, and I was trying, but the car kept falling and my lungs were screaming for oxygen. I couldn’t breathe. Then I couldn’t see, it was just so dark. When I heard people calling my name, I knew I wasn’t going to make it. I knew I was too late. I knew...”

“Oh, Grace.” Simon wrapped her in his arms.

“It was my fault,” she sobbed against his chest. “It was my fault.”

“How could it be your fault?” Simon asked, pain lacing every word. “You weren’t even there. You couldn’t have saved them.”

Grace read the frustration in his face. He didn’t get it. How could he?

“I could have, if I’d listened. I could have saved them.” Her words were barely audible over the screaming of her heart. The guilt, the regret whipping her from every side.

Simon had been shocked into silence by her admission.

She closed her eyes and clenched her teeth in an attempt to hold off the storm that was brewing. She was too exhausted, too broken to fight it. Her lips quivered with the effort. When she garnered some courage from the wreckage, she opened her eyes.

“Are you okay?” Eliza asked.

Grace released a heavy sigh and then laughed.

“Am I okay? No. I’m not okay.” She wiped tears from her cheek. “I’m tired, and I want to be alone. So, are we done? Have you got what you came for?” Grace knew she was being rude, but she was past caring. She just wanted to sleep. But how could she, when she knew what awaited her in her dreams.

Eliza raised her chin. “I have one more question, if that’s okay?”

“Ask it.”

“You said it was your fault. That if you’d listened, it wouldn’t have happened. Why do you say that?”

“You have to be kidding me.” Simon launched himself out of his seat. “The last thing she needs right now is someone feeding the ridiculous notion that she’s somehow to blame.”

“No, the last thing she needs is somebody saying what she’s feeling is ridiculous.” Eliza’s sharp words made their target known. “Now, you can either sit down and allow Grace and I to talk, or you can leave the room.”

Grace’s eyes darted between Simon and Eliza.

“Because it’s true.”

“Grace, you can’t possibly think you’re to blame.” Simon turned towards her, exasperation turning to disbelief.

“Sit down.” Grace reached up and squeezed his hand.

Simon lowered himself back onto the couch beside her.

“I was the one who wanted the groceries, the one who couldn’t wait until morning. I was the one who insisted David take the kids for a ride so I could have some peace and quiet, even though it was the last thing any of them wanted to do.”

“But Grace, you couldn’t have—”

“Let her speak.” Eliza warned, and then nodded at Grace to continue.

An image flashed before Grace of Patrick, Allie and David laid out in the morgue under white sheets, waiting for her to identify them. As soon as the first sheet was pulled back to reveal David’s grey pallor, she lost the ability to breathe and collapsed on the concrete floor.

Tears streamed down her face as she remembered. “I wouldn’t listen to David when he told me we could do a food run in the morning. He was tired after a big day at work and didn’t feel like getting back in the car. Allie and Patrick would’ve been happy staying at home too. I forced them to go. And now... now they’re all dead.” Grace released Simon’s hand and stood without warning. “So, yes, I do blame myself. Because it was my fault.”

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